



EPA "dropped the ball"; now let's see if

Editor:

In the year 2000, the EPA's Office of the Inspector General (OIG) launched an investigation into how it was that EPA "dropped the ball" in Libby, Mont. That is, why the reports developed by Midwest Research Institute, which were commissioned by EPA and published in 1982 and 1985, never saw the light of day. These studies were in regard to the W. R. Grace mining operations and their tremolite-amphibole asbestos contaminated products.

These reports should have thrown up a red flag for the EPA to take action in Libby, at least by 1985. The OIG investigation went on for a very long time, trying to figure out how EPA "dropped the ball." Finally, the EPA-OIG came back to Libby to a Community Advisory Group (CAG) meeting and informed us of their findings. They told us that our EPA has a communication problem. CAG and the audience of Libby people

were left speechless. As I recall, I was the only one who could, in that moment of astonishment, think of anything to say in response to such a pathetic excuse. I asked the EPA, "How many people does EPA currently employ in their communications branch?" The answer, of course, was "EPA doesn't have a communications branch."

While I expect that I will never be satisfied with the outcome of the OIG investigation, nor should anyone be, this investigation did accomplish a couple of things. It was firmly established that the EPA did, in fact, "drop the ball"; that the federal government is in part responsible for toxic exposure continuing in Libby. In addition, this OIG investigation provided a scrap of justice for the people.

Everyone is going to have a different opinion of what justice is in this matter and I expect that many of us may be sorely disappointed when it's all said and done.

Therefore, we must recognize justice wherever we can find a scrap. We must recognize the many faces of justice: the federally funded research being done in Missoula on behalf of Libby is a piece of justice, the fact that we have a federally funded Community Health Center in Libby is a piece of justice, a clinical research center for Libby, the use of Montana's one-time governor's pick, the "Silver Bullet," as top-priority status for this Superfund site, which has allowed the cleanup to continue under Emergency Response, all bits and pieces of justice being put forward on our behalf.

Probably the best piece of justice to date and worthy of special acknowledgement is the fact that EPA's senior toxicologist, Dr. Christopher Weis, and on-scene coordinator, Paul Peronard, in

2000, told us the truth about what happened here and what we were faced with in our future.

Chris and Paul only gave us the short story version of the truth and that was all that could have been expected of them. The rest of the truth has yet to be disclosed and will only become disclosed if, and again I say if, this criminal case against W. R. Grace reaches the point of going to trial. If this does not go to trial, if some deal is made between the federal government and W. R. Grace & Co., I expect we will never know the whole truth about all this. In my opinion, justice will not have been served until the truth comes forward. We deserve to know; America deserves to know, how this happened to us, how this was "allowed" to happen to us. While I may feel a sense of justice being served if some W. R.

there is any justice

Grace people go to jail, the greatest sense of justice for me will come from knowing this story does not perpetually repeat itself in other American towns.

We are entitled to know exactly, who is responsible, up and down the chain of government, who is responsible for allowing this to happen. For nearly 40 years, the truth about this amphibole family mineral fiber was elusive to the people of Libby. Today, this same truth remains elusive to the rest of America and people are going to prematurely die as a result. It's time to close the loopholes. It's time for policy change in America.

The criminal indictments are, in themselves, a piece of justice for Libby and I thank U.S. Attorney Bill Mercer and his crew for taking this step on our behalf. Please understand, though, that whatever

justice comes forward in this case, The United States vs. W. R. Grace & Co., belongs to us. Justice in this matter belongs to Red Morton, Michael Crill, D.C. Orr, the endless list of exposed, their families, friends and the many people who have already been killed by toxic exposure. Justice belongs to Terry Trent, who is screaming at the top of his lungs to get the federal government to simply inform the people in California about the truth of what happens to people who move their families into homes built upon deposits of tremolite-amphibole asbestos. Without the truth, there will be no justice. Truth is justice and it belongs to "we the people" of America.

Clinton Maynard, Libby